

**USE OF SINHARAJA FOREST BY PERIPHERAL VILLAGE
COMMUNITIES IN THE NELLUWA AREA**

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The Sinharaja forest comes under the category of 'tropical rain forests' and has been declared as UNESCO World Natural Heritage Reserve in 1989. It is located between $6^{\circ} 21' - 6^{\circ} 26'N$ and $80^{\circ} 34'E$. It encompasses parts of the Galle, Matara and Ratnapura districts. The inhabitants of some 27 peripheral villages of this primeval forest have interacted with it for a very long time. The present study was carried out in three selected peripheral villages of Sinharaja forest namely; Kosmulla, Thambalagama, Madugata and two villages situated within the forest; Warukandeniya and Kolonthotuwa. The study focuses on the spatial and temporal aspects as well as the wage of the magnitude of the community uses of this forest. Participatory observation approach was used for data collection. In this study, forty households that consists two hundred and forty nine members were selected within the study are for data collection. Only eighteen members, out of these villagers were employed in secondary sector and the rest involved in agriculture and forest utilization. The interaction between the villagers and the forest can be identified as, poaching, kitul tapping, gathering of wild resources, gathering of fuel wood and timber, small scale tea cultivation, mining for gems, tree felling and gathering of medicinal plant products. We study about the recent changes in the forest utilization such as kitul tapping, gathering of wild resources etc. On the other hand there is a gradual increase in hunting, deforestation for timber industry and for tea cultivation that occurs basically on commercial purposes. In conclusion, the traditional methods of forest utilization can be regarded as a friendly interaction between the forest and the users of forest resource. Also, the recent methods of forest utilization such as deforestation, hunting etc. have become a threat to the Singharaja forest. Further, the rapid population growth in these villages has direct influence on the deterioration of the forest resource. In order to diminish these adverse impacts, and for the conservation of the forest resource, there should be strong as well as practically applicable laws and rules. Moreover, it is important to modernize the traditional knowledge of villagers' that are related with the forest and environmental issues. The fact that should be clearly identified here is the inability to separate the villagers froms the forest. Yet it is important to motivate the villagers towards a progressive and positive forest utilization.